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Housekeepers' Chat

Tuesday, March 31, 1931

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Preventing Fires in the Home." Information from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Chemistry and Soils, and Public Roads, U.S.D.A.

Bulletin available: "Fire Safeguards for the Farm." (Farmers' Bulletin 1643).

Numbers never have meant very much to me. My imagination usually doesn't comprehend much over ten thousand. Any figure after that just registers in my mind as a large number -- and nothing more. Thirty thousand or three hundred thousand -- usually it seems all the same to me.

In geography class numbers caused me lots of trouble. I just could not recall the population of Paris or New York or Bombay, India. I couldn't even remember the number of inhabitants in my own town. A smarty little boy who sat in the next seat made it worse for me. He could answer such questions so glibly and he always gave me a look of pitying scorn when he popped up with the right figure after I had failed. In history it was also bad. Did Columbus cross the ocean blue in 1066 or 1492? I could never get the right date. And the Pilgrims, when, oh, when did they land? Was it 1621 or was that the year that Jamestown was founded? How I used to flounder over those dates. Arithmetic class was even worse. The smarty boy still haunts me in my dreams, especially when I've been working on household accounts in the evening. I think over how fast he could add up the columns of figures while I plodded far behind. And he knew his multiplication tables backward.

But I mustn't go into all this today. I just wanted to show you that from my earliest years numbers generally have failed to impress me. But now and then I meet a number that arrests my attention -- and then I never can forget it.

Yesterday as I was reading I came suddenly on the figure -- one hundred million dollars. "A lot of money," I said to myself. Even I realize that one hundred million dollars is an enormous amount. But what staggered me was to read that this much is lost every year by fires on farms. Just think of it! Fires waste that huge sum every single year. Experts who have been studying the problem say that the proper use of safeguards would cut this loss in half, or even more than half. And not only property but human life would be saved.

Here's where the old adage about the ounce of prevention comes true again. Before considering the best means of fighting fire, let's think about preventing it. There are so many common-sense ways of keeping fires from ever getting started in your home, so many small things that make for safety and avert tragedy.



Did you ever consider that the way your house is built and then the way it is run makes a great deal of difference in the fire-hazard? The location of the house and the barn with reference to the prevailing winds will prevent the sparks from the chimney, on some dry and windy day, from setting fire to the barn. Then there is safe roofing material to be considered, and also chimney construction, lighting protection, and electrical installations.

The man of the house and the contractor and builder should consider these points. But there are plenty of ways for the woman of the house to help in a safety campaign for her home. Stoves, lamps and other heating and lighting apparatus are largely in her care and experts tell us that a large percentage of fires are due to carelessness in the placing and use of heating and lighting equipment.

We won't have to say much about furnaces at this time of year, except to mention that they need attention from the safety point of view. Both stoves and furnaces should be put up very solidly. And they should be placed so that heat from them cannot ignite nearby walls or woodwork. If the room is not large enough or of the right size to place the stove at a safe distance from the walls, sheets of metal or asbestos should cover the wall behind the stove. As for the floor under the stove, that should be protected too, by a substantial mat of metal or asbestos. This mat should extend well out beyond the edge of the stove, particularly on the side containing the door to the fire-box, from which burning embers are likely to fall.

Size in heating apparatus also counts in providing safety. Stoves or furnaces should be of such size that sufficient heat can be generated to keep the home at the proper temperature, even in coldest weather, without crowding or overheating them. Stoves and furnaces large enough to do their jobs efficiently without overheating last longer and are safer to use.

Then there is this matter of the soot that collects in stoves, chimneys and pipes. If you allow a crust of soot to gather, it may catch fire some day and cause a good deal of damage, so keep it out by brushing. You can use a wire-brush chimney cleaner, especially made for the purpose, or a homemade brush such as a bunch of evergreens tied to a rope, or even a bundle of coarse hay, if the wisps are well twisted together.

Have you noticed how your stove-pipe is placed? That is important. For greatest safety, it should enter directly into the chimney without passing through walls or partitions.

But if the way the house is built makes it necessary that the stove-pipe pass through a wall to reach the chimney, protect the wall with a ventilating thimble. No, this thimble has nothing to do with sewing. It is purchased at a hardware store and fits into the hole made in the wall or floor for the pipe. Air circulates through the open spaces in the thimble on all sides of the pipe and carries off much of the heat. This greatly reduces the danger of fire from an overhead pipe.





Here let me remind you that metal smoke pipes should never pass through floors, closets or other concealed spaces. Such an arrangement has often caused fires that were not discovered until they had gained serious headway.

, When any of my friends tells me about using gasoline at home for stoves, or for cleaning or for any of the many purposes where it comes in handy, I always inquire whether she is using it carefully. Gasoline can be such a dangerous substance that it always pays to remember its high explosive power. If it is kept in quantity on your property, it should be stored only in underground tanks from which it is pumped as needed. It is dangerous to store gasoline inside any building. Its vapors are heavier than air and tend to form first along the floor. A room may contain considerable gasoline vapor before it becomes perceptible to the people in the room because, their heads are well above the vapor line. A flame or even a spark may cause an explosion before the vapor has even been noticed. No open flame of any kind should be permitted anywhere about where gasoline is being poured or even handled. All containers for gasoline should be painted a bright red and distinctly labeled "gasoline."

Many fatal accidents have resulted from using this substance for cleaning purposes. Outdoors, in the open air, the vapor from the gasoline will diffuse rather promptly and lose much of its explosive nature. Indoors, however, it is a different story. The vapor from open gasoline containers, or from garments saturated with the liquid is confined and may cause a destructive explosion if a spark or flame of any kind comes in contact with it. The mere rubbing of silk fabric -- just the friction necessary to take out a soiled spot -- may produce a spark and then, of course, set fire to the gasoline vapor. What about using benzene or naphtha for cleaning? They are also dangerous materials. Since there are so many safe cleaning fluids now on the market which are just as effective for the job and which will neither explode nor burn, why not choose those for cleaning at home?

Many housewives, especially those in the country, use oil stoves and gasoline stoves for cooking, particularly in summer when wood and coal ranges cause the kitchen to be uncomfortably hot. Handy and useful as these stoves are, let's not forget that they can also be dangerous if not properly used. It pays to follow the manufacturer's directions in handling them. Oil stoves and, I might add, oil lamps as well, should be filled by daylight well away from a heated stove or a flame of any kind. Perhaps I'd better not use that expression "fill" when speaking of oil stoves and lamps. The oil chamber should never be really filled, because space must be left for the expansion of the oil from the heat generated by the lighted wick. If the chamber is so full that the oil comes almost up to the flame, it may cause an overflow of burning liquid that endangers the family as well as the house. Be sure your stove stands solidly and evenly on the floor. And if you use kerosene lamps, either in your farm home or in your summer cottage, remember to stand them always on a solid foundation. Don't take a chance by placing them on a rickety box or table.

Oh, my time is up and I have so much more I wanted to tell you. Well, fortunately, there is a new bulletin called "Fire Safeguards for the Farm." It contains a great deal of valuable information for any housewife, whether she lives in town or in the country. So, if you are interested, write us and you shall have a copy.

Tomorrow: Training Appetites.

